

SAMUEL JOHNSON

“PREFACE TO SHAKESPEARE”: QUESTIONS WITH ANSWERS

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AN ANSWER KEY IS PROVIDED AT THE END OF THE HANDOUT (p. 5).

Text used: Charles Kaplan and William David Anderson, eds. Criticism: Major Statements, 4th ed. New York: Bedford, 2000.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) was acknowledged as the “literary dictator” in England during the second half of the _____ century.
2. In 1755, Johnson published his monumental _____ of the English Language, the first significant dictionary ever published in English and the basis of all English dictionaries.
3. In 1765, Johnson published his edition of The Plays of William Shakespeare in 1765. Its “Preface to Shakespeare” is significant because it defended Shakespeare for not following the classical _____ of drama.

II. “PREFACE TO SHAKESPEARE”

1. Johnson begins with AFFECTIVE criticism, that is, how a literary work affects a reader: He asserts that the only determination of literary genius is the test of time: “No other _____ can be applied than _____ of duration and continuance of _____” by audiences and readers (Kaplan and Anderson 201).

Shakespeare’s works are still being performed and studied well over a hundred years after his death: “He has outlived his _____, the term commonly fixed as the test of _____ merit” (202).

2. In his “Preface,” Johnson says he will try to answer the question: Why has Shakespeare’s works survived?

3. Johnson begins by praising Shakespeare’s imitation of the universal and general in his plays.

4. Using a MIMETIC approach, that is, how a literary work imitates the real world, Johnson says, “Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general _____ Shakespeare is above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of _____; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful _____ (British spelling is used here) of manners and of life” (202).

Shakespeare imitates not the particular and the passing, but the general and the universal. His “characters are not modified by the customs of _____ places . . . or by accidents of transient fashions or _____ opinions; they are the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply His [characters] act and speak by the influence of those _____ passions and principles by which all minds are agitated In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual; in those of _____ it is commonly a species” (202).

5. Statement after statement in his “Preface” affirms Johnson’s belief in the excellence of Shakespeare’s realism: Shakespeare “excels in accommodating his sentiments to _____ life” (203). He is the poet “who caught his ideas from the _____ world” (203). “This therefore is the praise of Shakespeare, that his drama is the mirrour of _____” (204). (Note: The last seven words of this quote from Johnson are chiseled in stone over the entrance to the famous Folger Shakespearean Library in Washington, D. C.)

6. Johnson then praises Shakespeare in an area in which many critics had faulted the playwright: The mingling of comic and tragic scenes in his plays, whether they were comedies, tragedies, or histories: “The _____ which [Shakespeare] has incurred by _____ comick and tragick scenes” (204).

Johnson concludes that such mingling is realistic since it shows “the _____ state” of the world, “which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow” (204). Shakespeare’s plays have the “powers of exciting laughter and sorrow” (205). He continues that such mingling of the tragic and the comic meets the ends of poetic writing: “to _____ by _____” (205). (Thus Johnson uses AFFECTIVE criticism to praise Shakespeare.

7. Having examined Shakespeare’s “excellencies,” Johnson admits that Shakespeare “has likewise faults” (207). Six major ones are listed.

(1) Morality: Johnson says Shakespeare at times in his desire “to please than to instruct” “seems to write without any _____ purpose” (207). He says that in Shakespeare’s plays there sometimes is “no just distribution of _____ or evil” or “right and _____” (207). AFFECTIVE CRITICISM.

(2) Loosely structured plots, with the “_____” in some plays being “improbably produced or imperfectly represented” (207).

(3) His plays are replete with _____ (208) or the representation of something in a play which did not exist at the time of the play, such as the reference to a clock in *Julius Caesar* 2.1.193-94.

(4) His comic scenes sometimes center on the “_____” or sexual (208).

(5) At times, _____ in his plays are inflated, pompous, and passionless (208).

(6) He uses many _____: “A quibble [pun] . . . gave him such delight, that he was content to purchase it, by the sacrifice of reason, propriety and truth” (209).

8. Johnson says that it “will be thought strange, that, in enumerating the defects of [Shakespeare], I have not yet mentioned his neglect of the _____,” as other critics of Shakespeare have done (209).

He says that in his comedies and tragedies Shakespeare “preserved the unity of _____” because his plays follow Aristotle’s requirement that of causation: “one event is _____ [causally connected] with another, and the conclusion follows by easy consequence” (209).

“To the unities of _____ and _____ [Shakespeare shows] no regards” (210). Johnson appeals to both EXPRESSIVE and AFFECTIVE theories by saying that the unities of time and place “have given more _____ to the _____, than _____ to the [audience]” (210).

He then follows with a MIMETIC attack on the unities of time and place: “The necessity of observing the unities of time and place arises from the supposed necessity of making the drama _____. The critics hold it impossible, that an action of months or years can be possibly believed to pass in three hours; or that the spectator can suppose himself to sit in the theatre, while [characters] go and come” from one place to another. “The mind revolts from evident _____, and fiction loses its force when it departs from the resemblance of _____” (210).

Johnson states, “It is time therefore to tell [the critic who supports the unities of time and place] by the _____ of _____” that he is advocating principles of the theater which “his understanding pronounces to be false. It is _____, that any [dramatic] representation is mistaken for _____” (210).

When a person enters a theater to see a play, this person accepts the opening scene as representing a specific setting (for instance Alexandria or Rome). “Sure he that imagines this [opening setting] may _____ more. He that can take the stage at one time for the palace of the Ptolemies, may take it in half an hour for the promontory of Actium. _____, if _____ be admitted [once], has no certain limitation” (210).

Johnson continues, “The truth is, that the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is only a _____, and that the players [actors] are only _____” (210).

“The delight of tragedy proceeds from our _____ of _____; if we thought murders and treasons real, they would please no more” (211).

“A play read, affects the mind like a play acted. It is therefore evident, that the action is not supposed to be _____” (211).

Johnson concludes his discussion by stating that whether “Shakespeare knew the _____, and _____ them by design, or deviated from them by _____ ignorance, it is, I think, impossible to decide and useless to enquire” (212).

He states that “such _____ of _____” are a sign of “the comprehensive _____ of Shakespeare” (212).

Johnson concludes that observance of the unities of time and place “are always to be sacrificed to the nobler beauties of _____ and _____, and that a play, written with nice [exact] observation of critical _____, is . . . an elaborate _____” (212).

Johnson’s attack on the unities of time and place revolutionized drama. No future playwrights felt that they must take these into account in structuring a play, unless the plot of the play was intensified by using them.

9. EXPRESSIVE THEORY: Johnson speculates “whether Shakespeare owed his excellence to his own _____ force, or whether he had the common helps of scholastic education” (215). Johnson says that much of the “knowledge” “scattered over [Shakespeare’s works] appears to him to come not from the “knowledge” of “_____,” but of life itself (216). The “greater part of his excellence was the product of his own _____” (216).

10. Pages 219-31 discuss the previous editions of Shakespeare which Johnson used in compiling his own edition.

ANSWER KEY

I.

1. 18th.
2. Dictionary.
3. "rules."

II.

1. test; length; esteem.
2. century; literary.
4. nature; nature; mirroure; particular; temporary; general; Shakespeare.
5. real; living; life.
6. censure; mixing; real; instruct; pleasing.
7. moral; good; wrong; catastrophe; anachronisms; licentious; speech; puns.
8. unities; action; concatenation; time; place; trouble; poet; pleasure; credible; falsehood; reality; authority; Shakespeare; false; reality; imagine; delusion; Delusion; stage; players; consciousness; fiction; real; unities; rejected; happy; violations; rules; genius; variety; instructions; rules; curiosity.
9. native; books; genius.